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Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5306
INFO AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH
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AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE
AMEMBASSY RANGOON
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
AMCONSUL SONGKHLA
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 BANGKOK 11955

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E. O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, PFOR, TH, US
SUBJECT: THAILAND HAS CHANGED SINCE OCTOBER 1973

SUMMARY: OBSERVERS OF THE THAI SCENE, INCLUDING WESTERN JOURNALISTS, SOMETIMES COMMENT THAT THAILAND HAS NOT CHANGED DESPITE THE OCTOBER DEPARTURES OF THANOM, PRAPHAT, AND NARONG. THIS ASSUMPTION IS INCORRECT. WHILE MUCH OF THE BUREAUCRATIC ICEBERG HAS YET TO SHIFT ITS POSITION, THERE ARE NEW FORCES IN ITS SURFACE THAT SEEM BOUND EVENTUALLY TO PERMEATE TO THE DEPTHS.
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THE GOVERNMENT HEEDS CRITICISM FROM PRESSURE GROUPS

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AND ENGAGES IN OPEN DIALOGUE WITH THE COUNTRY. THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY IS NO LONGER A RUBBER STAMP. THE CABINET HAS SOME UNUSALLY TALENTED AND ASSERTIVE MEN. POLITICAL PARTIES ARE EMERGING AND THE MILITARY ARE LESS PUBLIC. THE THAI ARE MAKING THEIR FIRST REAL EFFORTS AT LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY, AND, EVEN IF THEY ARE NOT SUCCESSFUL, THE POLITICAL PROCESS WILL NEVER BE QUITE THE SAME. IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THE PUBLIC WILL EVER BE AS QUIESCENT AS IN THE PAST, OR THAT CIVILIAN BUREAUCRATS WILL WILLINGLY TAKE A BACK SEAT IN DECISION MAKING.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES ARE SIGNIFICANT IN THAT THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS IS INCREASINGLY ASSERTIVE IN FOREIGN POLICY DECISIONS MAKING VIS-A-VIS THE MILITARY. BECAUSE THE SANYA GOVERNMENT IS MORE SENSITIVE TO PUBLIC OPINION AND PRESSURES, WE CAN EXPECT IT TO BE MORE RESPONSIVE TO GROWING STUDENT AND POLITICIAN GENERATED DEMANDS FOR FURTHER U.S. FORCE REDUCTIONS.

THIS MESSAGE WILL EXAMINE BRIEFLY SEVERAL DIFFERENT AREAS AND/OR INSTITUTIONS WHERE CHANGES IN THE WAY OF GOVERNING ARE CLEARLY EVIDENT: PUBLIC RELATIONS, DECISION MAKING, THE LEGISLATURE, AND THE CABINET. END SUMMARY.

PUBLIC RELATIONS: A NEW GOVERNMENT STYLE

1. FROM HIS FIRST DAYS IN OFFICE, PRIME MINISTER SANYA THAMMASAK BEGAN A DIALOGUE WITH THE THAI PUBLIC. HIS APPROACH SIGNALLED THAT THE GOVERNMENT WOULD DISCUSS ITS PROBLEMS WITH THE PEOPLE. THERE IS NOW CONSIDERABLE FEEDBACK, BOTH CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE, BUT SANYA'S STYLE IS AN ATTEMPT TO SHOW WILLINGNESS TO LISTEN TO THE COMPLAINTS OF ALL GROUPS. THIS IS SO UNIQUE IN THAI HISTORY THAT IT MAKES PEOPLE UNEASY. CONSERVATIVE CRITICS CHARGE THAT THE GOVERNMENT IS WEAK. SANYA IS DEMONSTRATING, HOWEVER, WHAT HE PERCEIVES TO BE THE PROPER RESPONSE OF CONFIDENTIAL

A DEMOCRATIC GOVERNMENT. WHEREAS PREVIOUS GOVERN-MENTS USED PUBLIC CRITICISM AS AN EXCUSE TO CLOSE OFF CHANNELS OF DISSENT AND FEEDBACK, SANYA IS DEMONSTRATING A RESTRAINT WHICH FUTURE GOVERNMENTS MAY HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO FOLLOW.

2. PRIME MINISTER SANYA HAS MADE UNPRECEDENTED USE OF TELEVISION TO BOLSTER HIS GOVERNMENT'S STANDING WITH

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THE PUBLIC. NO PREVIOUS THAI GOVERNMENT HAS MADE SUCH A BID FOR MASS COMPREHENSION. SANYA USED THE "MEET THE PEOPLE" NATIONAL TELEVISION SHOWS TO INTRODUCE THE CABINET MEMBERS AND HAVE THEM DISCUSS THE PROBLEMS OF THE DAY. ON ONE SHOW, IN WHICH HE AND GENERAL KRIT SIWARA APPEARED TOGETHER, KRIT PLEDGED THE MILITARY WOULD NOT INTERFERE WITH THE GOVERNMENT, A FACT WHICH THE PUBLIC REMEMBERS. SANYA'S COLLOQUIAL STYLE ON THESE PROGRAMS CONTRIBUTED TO THE FEELING THAT THE GOVERNMENT WAS IN CONTROL OF THE COUNTRY AFTER ITS FIRST FEW DAYS IN OFFICE.

3. THE SANYA GOVERNMENT'S FIRST ORDER OF PRIORITY WAS TO RESPOND TO THE PUBLIC DEMAND FOR A NEW CONSTITUTION. SANYA PROMISED SPECIFIC DEADLINES FOR THE DRAFT CONSTITUTION AND DID A CREDITABLE JOB OF MEETING THEM. THIS IS PARTICULARLY SO IN LIGHT OF THE PROCRASTINATION ON NEARLY ALL PREVIOUS DRAFTS. THROUGHOUT THE DRAFTING PROCESS, REGULAR COMMUNIQUES FROM THE CONSTITUTION DRAFTING COMMITTEE KEPT THE PUBLIC INFORMED. THE NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY'S (NLA) CONSTITUTION SCRUTINIZING COMMITTEE ALSO RELEASED COMMUNIQUES ON ITS PROGRESS.

4. NATIONALLY BROADCASTING THE DELIBERATIONS OF THE NLA IS ANOTHER ILLUSTRATION OF THE GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO INTERACT WITH ITS PUBLIC CONSTITUENCY. WHILE SOME ARGUE THAT THESE BROADCASTS STIMULATE GRANDSTANDING, IT MUST BE RECOGNIZED THAT THE PREVIOUS GOVERNMENT WOULD NOT HAVE FELT THE NEED TO BROADCAST THE TURGID DELIBERATIONS OF ITS MILITARY DOMINATED LGISLATURE.

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DECISION MAKING

5. DECISION MAKING IN THE THANOM GOVERNMENT WAS HIGHLY CENTRALIZED. IN THE AREA OF FOREIGN POLICY, FIELD MARSHAL THANOM KITTHIKACHON COVERED THE IMPORTANT BASES AS PRIME MINISTER, SUPREME COMMANDER, MINISTER OF DEFENSE, AND FOREIGN MINISTER. FIELD MARSHAL PRAPHAT CHARUNSATHIAN'S MILITARY POSITIONS (COMMANDER IN CHIEF OF THE ARMY AND DEPUTY SUPREME COMMANDER) AND CIVILIAN POSITIONS (DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, MINISTER OF INTERIOR, AND ACTING DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE THAI NATIONAL POLICE DEPARTMENT) ALSO ILLUSTRATE CONFIDENTIAL

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THIS POINT. THIS CENTRALIZATION IS NOT TRUE WITH THE SANYA GOVERNMENT. SUPREME COMMAND, THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (MFA), AND THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR ARE SEPARATE ENTITIES. THIS CHANGE HAS ALLOWED THE CIVILIAN BUREAUCRACIES TO INCREASE, AT LEAST TEMPORARILY, THEIR INFLUENCE OVER POLICY UNDER THE SANYA GOVERNMENT. WE HAVE SEEN A RESURGENT INTEREST FROM MFA IN FOREIGN AFFAIRS; FOR EXAMPLE, THE P-3 FLIGHTS OVER THE INDIAN OCEAN.

6. THE POWERFUL BUREAUCRACIES ARE PRESENTLY CONDUCTING BUSINESS ALONG PREVIOUS LINES. THE GOVERNMENT HAS NOT RADICALLY REORGANIZED THEM, BUT THERE ARE FORCES IN THE WINGS WHICH MAY PRESSURE FOR MORE SUBSTANTIAL REFORM. WITH THE DECLINE OF THAI MILITARY INFLUENCE (SEE PARA 5), THE MILITARY AND CIVILIAN BUREAUCRACIES WILL BEGIN TO COMPETE MORE EQUALLY THAN BEFORE AMONG THEMSELVES FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S RESOURCES. THIS SHOULD BECOME EVEN MORE EVIDENT WHEN THE BUDGET FOR THE FISCAL YEAR, WHICH

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STARTS 1 OCTOBER 1974, GOES TO THE ASSEMBLY.

7. ANOTHER FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SANYA'S GOVERN-

MENT AND THANOM'S IS THAT VARIOUS INTEREST GROUPS NOW PUBLICLY CHALLENGE EACH OTHER. SANYA HAS NOT EXCHANGED THE DOMINATION OF ONE GROUP--BE THEY FARMERS, TECHNOCRATS, MILITARY OFFICERS, STUDENTS, OR BUSINESSMEN--FOR THE DOMINATION OF ANOTHER. THE SANYA GOVERNMENT HAS ESTABLISHED AN ENVIRONMENT IN WHICH THESE GROUPS CAN COMPETE AMONG THEMSELVES FOR THE NATION'S ATTENTION AND RESOURCES.

LEGISLATURE

8. THE PROCEDURE WHICH SELECTED THE PRESENT NLA WAS UNIQUE. OVER 2000 PEOPLE REPRESENTING A WIDE RANGE OF INTERESTS WERE NOMINATED TO A NATIONAL CONVENTION WHICH THEN ELECTED THE NEW ASSEMBLY FROM THEIR OWN NUMBER. THE GOVERNMENT, UNLIKE ITS PREDECESSORS, DID NOT INTERFERE IN THE FINAL CHOICES. AS A RESULT THE ASSEMBLYMEN FROM THE BEGINNING WERE NOT HANDPICKED CABINET SUPPORTERS. THIS PROCESS HAS STIMULATED THE POLITICAL INTEREST OF FORMERLY CONFIDENTIAL

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APATHETIC TECHNOCRATS. IT HAS ALSO BROUGHT CERTAIN PEOPLE OF TALENT TO THE PRIME MINISTER'S ATTENTION. THE SELECTION OF TEN NLA MEMBERS FOR THE SECOND SANYA CABINET WAS A FULFILLMENT OF THIS NOVEL PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING THE SELECTING TALENT.

9. THE NLA UNDER THE SANYA GOVERNMENT IS A SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT BODY FROM THE THANOM-APPOINTED ASSEMBLY THAT PRECEDED IT. THE PREVIOUS LEGISLATURE, OUT OF 299 MEMBERS, HAD 200 MILITARY AND POLICE OFFICERS. THE CURRENT ONE HAS ONLY 36. FAR FROM BEING A RUBBER STAMP, THE PRESENT NLA HAS ESTABLISHED AN IDENTITY DISTINCT FROM THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH. QUESTIONS WHETHER ITS MEMBERS ARE REPRESENTATIVES OF ALL THE PEOPLE ARE OVERRIDDEN BY THE FACT THAT THEY REPRESENT CONSIDERABLY MORE THAN THE THAI MILITARY AND POLICE. THE PRESENT ASSEMBLY INCLUDES SOME OF THE BEST TALENT IN THAI SOCIETY. EVEN THIS RESPECTED TALENT IS DEMONSTRATING THAT LEGISLATURES HAVE INTERESTS OF THEIR OWN. THE CONSCIENTIOUSNESS OF THIS RESPECTED ASSEMBLY IS TEACHING THE COUNTRY SOME BASIC LESSONS IN PATIENCE AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS.

CABINET

10. IN A COUNTRY WITH A POLITICAL HISTORY OF COUPS, SANYA

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RESIGNED AS PRIME MINISTER. HE RESIGNED WHEN HE FELT THAT HE DID NOT HAVE SUFFICIENT POPULAR SUPPORT FOR HIS GOVERNMENT; HE WAS NOT THROWN OUT. THIS IS A UNIQUE POLITICAL MOVE FOR THAILAND. WHATEVER ELSE HIS CONTRIBUTION, SANYA WILL LEAVE THE IDEA THAT THE GOVERNMENT NEEDS, AND SHOULD SEEK, PUBLIC SUPPORT. FUTURE GOVERNMENTS, EVEN IF THE MILITARY DOMINATES THEM, WILL PROBABLY HAVE TO CONDUCT THEIR BUSINESS IN A MORE OVERT FASHION THAN PREVIOUSLY.

11. THE SANYA CABINET CONTAINS CAREER GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS, AS DID PREVIOUS GOVERNMENTS, BUT THE CABINET NO LONGER INCLUDES ACTIVE MILITARY OFFICERS AT THE HEAD OF CIVILIAN BUREAUCRACIES. SANYA HAS ALSO SELECTED HIS CABINET TO INCLUDE MORE EXPERTISE AT HIGHER LEVELS. DURING THE THANOM GOVERNMENT, SOME CABINET ASSIGNMENTS WERE DOLED OUT WITH AN EYE TO PREVENTING COUPS. THIS
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TECHNIQUE CREATED A GOVERNMENTAL STYLE IN WHICH COMPETENT OFFICIALS WERE ALLOWED TO RUN THE ECONOMY OR THE BUREAUCRACY, BUT COULD NEVER RISE TO THE MINISTERIAL LEVEL TO CHALLENGE THE MILITARY MONOPOLY. SANYA HAS INTRODUCED NEW CRITERIA FOR CABINET MEMBERS, THUS SUPPORTING A STYLE CHANGE IN NATIONAL POLITICAL VALUES: CABINET MEMBERS SHOULD BE HONORABLE, CAPABLE MEN. IF THEY ARE NOT ABLE TO CARRY OUT THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES, THEY SHOULD RESIGN (WHICH THEY DID). HIGH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS SHOULD WORK FOR THE PUBLIC BENEFIT, NOT THEMSELVES.

12. THE RECENT CABINET RESHUFFLE ILLUSTRATES THE DEPTH OF THE POLITICAL ATTITUDINAL CHANGES IN THAILAND. THE CABINET RESIGNED BECAUSE IT FELT IT HAD LOST PUBLIC SUPPORT. IN A UNIQUE INTERPRETATION OF THE 1972 CONSTITUTION, THE NLA BECAME THE INSTRUMENT FOR SELECTING THE PRIME MINISTER.

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COMMENT:

13. THE POLITICAL AND ATTITUDINAL CHANGES WHICH HAVE OCCURRED IN THAILAND OVER THE PAST MONTHS WILL MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO GO BACK TO THE OLD SYSTEM. EVEN THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP WOULD HAVE TO MAKE SOME CONCESSIONS TO THE NEW SENSE OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION. SANYA HAS BEEN INSTRUMENTAL IN DETERMINING THE DIRECTION OF SOME OF THESE LIBERALIZING TRENDS, PARTICULARLY HIS RESPONSIVENESS TO THE PUBLIC.

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14. THAILAND REMAINS POLITICALLY IMMATURE. IT IS IN THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING INSTITUTIONS FOR TRAINING POLITICAL LEADERS. IT HAS NOT YET PRODUCED A BROAD-BASED SYSTEM WHICH WILL REGULATE COMPETITION AMONG VARIOUS LOBBYING GROUPS. THERE WILL BE A DIFFICULT AND TIME-CONSUMING PROCESS IN BALANCING FACTIONS AND MAKING DECISIONS. THE THAI WILL NEED CONSIDERABLE MODERATION TO SURVIVE THE INSECURITIES OF DEMOCRATIC DECISION-

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MAKING. AT PRESENT THE THAI MAY HAVE EXPECTATIONS WHICH OUT-STRIP THE PERFORMANCE OF A REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT. WE CAN EXPECT, THEREFORE, GRADUALLY INCREASING POLITICAL PRESSURES WHICH WILL PEAK AND SUBSIDE UNTIL THE SOCIETY REACHES ITS OWN LEVEL OF POLITICAL ACTIVISM.

15. THOSE WHO ASSUME THAT A "CINDERELLA-LIKE" CHANGE WOULD OCCUR ONCE THE MILITARY STEPPED ASIDE ARE IGNORING THE REALITIES OF POWER. IN A POLITICAL SITUATION WHERE ONE GROUP DOES NOT HAVE A MONOPOLY OF POWER, IT IS DIFFICULT TO ACCELERATE REFORM. COMPETITION AND COMPROMISE BETWEEN INTEREST GROUPS SLOW REFORM. THE ABSENCE OF IMMEDIATE AND TOTAL STRUCTURAL REFORM DOES NOT MEAN, HOWEVER, THAT SIGNIFICANT AND SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES IN THAI POLITICS HAVE NOT TAKEN PLACE.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNITED STATES

16. WE CANNOT TAKE THE THAI FOR GRANTED. WITH THE DECLINE IN MILITARY SUPREMACY THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS IS INCREASING ITS FOREIGN POLICY ROLE. IT WOULD APPEAR, AT LEAST FOR THE MOMENT, THAT MFA IS NOT IN OPPOSITION TO AMERICAN POLICIES TOWARDS THAILAND AS MUCH AS IT IS ENGAGED IN AN INTERBUREAUCRATIC STRUGGLE TO INCREASE ITS INFLUENCE IN THE THAI DECISION-MAKING APPARATUS, AND UNDERMINE THE MILITARY'S POWER BASE.

17. THE PUBLIC RESPONSIVENESS OF THE SANYA GOVERNMENT MEANS THAT IT MAY BE RELUCTANT TO DEFEND IN TOTO VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE AMERICAN MILITARY PRESENCE IN THAILAND. THE GOVERNMENT WILL NOT ACTIVELY REPRESS PUBLIC EX-PRESSIONS OF DISPLEASURE OVER OUR PRESENCE. IT MAY HAVE TO RESPOND TO A GROUND SWELL FOR FURTHER AMERICAN
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FORCE REDUCTIONS WHICH STUDENT, PRESSURE GROUPS AND POLITICIANS MAY GENERATE.
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